

NORRIS
The Death Mask of
Shakespeare



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THE
DEATH MASK

OF

SHAKESPEARE

BY

J. PARKER NORRIS

(ONE HUNDRED AND FIFTY COPIES PRIVATELY REPRINTED FROM THE FEBRUARY
NUMBER OF "SHAKESPEARIANA")

PHILADELPHIA
FRANKLIN PRINTING HOUSE
321 CHESTNUT STREET
1884



THE KESSELSTADT PICTURE.

THE DEATH MASK.

ON November 18th, 1841, Count and Canon Francis von Kesselstadt died in Mayence. In June, 1842, the paintings, etc., belonging to this nobleman were sold at auction in that town. Among them was a small picture, painted in oil, on parchment, representing a corpse, with the head surrounded by a wreath, lying in state on a bed. In the background is a burning taper and the date A.D. 1637 in gold letters. This picture was purchased by S. Jourdan, an antiquary, living in Mayence, who sold it in 1847 to Ludwig Becker. The latter was a portrait painter, and lived in Darmstadt, and the Grand Duke of Hesse appointed him "Court painter." In 1845 or 1846 he moved to Mayence. Here he saw the little painting, which he purchased in 1847 from Jourdan, as before stated.

This picture is said to have been in the possession of the Kesselstadt family for more than a century. Francis von Kesselstadt (of whose estate it formed part when sold at auction in 1842) was a collector and lover of pictures. He owned portraits of many historical personages, among which may be named those of Albrecht von Brandenburg, Gustavus Adolphus, Henry IV, Martin Luther, Melanchthon, Albrecht Dürer, and Martin Schön. He also had a number of portraits of celebrated poets, and, among the latter, this little picture, which was afterwards bought by

Becker, occupied a prominent place, bearing the inscription :

"TRADITIONEN NACH SHAKESPEARE."
("According to tradition, Shakespeare.")

In this connection it is only proper to state that Ludwig Becker, in a little pamphlet in which he gives the details of his purchase, etc., of this portrait, states that Count and Canon Francis von Kesselstadt died in the year 1843; but the date given above as the year of his death (1841) is that stated by Dr. Hermann Schaaffhausen in his article "Ueber die Todtenmaske Shakespeare's," published in the *Jahrbuch* of the German Shakespeare Society for 1875.

Professor N. Müller, of Mayence, who knew the Count and Canon Francis von Kesselstadt quite well from 1790, wrote Becker a letter dated February 28th, 1847, in which he says he saw this picture in the Count's collection, and that he knew the Count refused "some very handsome offers from the parties anxious to become purchasers" of it, and that it was always received by all the visitors to his gallery as an authentic portrait of Shakespeare.

The date on the picture, 1637, did not correspond with the year in which Shakespeare died, 1616, and Becker formed the idea that it had probably been copied from some older one or from a cast or statue. He subsequently ascertained that a plaster-of-

Paris cast of a face had also formed part of the Count's collection, but that on the sale of his effects it had received little consideration, and no one remembered who had bought it. Becker was not discouraged, however, and in 1849, two years after he had purchased the little picture, he tells us he found the Mask he was searching for in Mayence, "in a broker's shop, amongst rags and articles of the meanest description."



THE DEATH MASK.—FIG. 1.

Becker at once recognized the cast from its likeness to the picture, but I cannot discover any resemblance. Others, however, have pronounced that the picture has evidently been copied from the Mask. The excellent engravings of the picture and the Mask, which accompany this article, were made with the greatest care from photographs taken from the originals, and will enable the reader to judge of the resemblance said to exist between the two.

In 1849 Ludwig Becker went to England, taking the Mask and the little oil painting with him. Here they were examined by the authorities of the British Museum and by many others. In 1850 Becker went to Melbourne, leaving the Mask and picture in the custody of Professor Owen, of the British Museum. Becker died April 24th, 1861, while on an expedition across the Australian continent under the auspices of the British Government. On the fact of his death becoming known to Professor Owen, the latter returned the Mask and picture to his brothers, and since then they have been in the custody of Dr. Ernest Becker, of Darmstadt.

The Mask has evidently been made from a dead face. It is of plaster-of-Paris, and is of a dirty yellow color. This yellowish appearance is owing to the oil with which it has

been covered, and which has soaked into it. This oil was probably rubbed on it when another copy was made from it, and would seem to indicate that it has been used to model from. Some hairs adhere to the moustache and the beard on the Mask, and also on the eyebrows and eyelashes. These hairs have been proven, by examination with the microscope, to be human. They are of a reddish brown or auburn color, and correspond to the color of the beard and hair on the Stratford bust and the description of its original color on that effigy. With regard to this, however, it is only proper to state that the hair of a person which has been naturally of a dark color when living often turns to a reddish brown on being cut off and kept for a long time. This is probably caused by chemical change in the coloring matter in the hair, owing to want of the nourishment which it received when growing.

To explain how these hairs became affixed to the Mask, it will be necessary to say a few words about the manner in which masks are made, which was probably employed in making this one also. The first process is to make an impression or mould of the face. A band of cloth is placed around the head of the person whose face is to be copied. This band encircles the head about where the ears are, and leaves exposed all the chin and forehead—in fact, the entire face in front of it. Soft wax is now poured over the face, and is kept by the band from running too



THE DEATH MASK.—FIG. 2.

far. It quickly hardens, and is easily removed. The eyebrows, eyelashes, moustache, and beard have been previously greased or covered with soap and water to prevent the wax from adhering to the hairs. In spite of this precaution, however, some few of the

hairs will adhere to the wax mould, and are pulled out of the skin when the wax is removed. This mould is now an exact copy of the face from which it has been taken, but, of course, it is the opposite of a human face, for where the protuberances of the latter are, they are represented in the mould by corresponding indentations. Among sculptors the result of this process is known as a "flying mould."



THE DEATH MASK.—FIG. 3.

The mould is then oiled and filled with liquid plaster-of-Paris or wax. When this is taken out of the mould, a perfect cast representing each detail of the face from which it was taken appears, and in this process some of the hairs which had adhered to the mould are transferred to the cast. Frequently the mould becomes broken in making a cast, and then the cast has to be oiled to make another mould. The yellowish appearance of the Death Mask would indicate, as before stated, that it had been used to produce another mould. A cast of the face only is technically termed a "mask."

It would seem probable in the case of the Death Mask that a wax mask was first cast in the mould, as the Mask shows a slight wave along the bridge of the nose, and also a flattened surface, where the pores of the skin—which are everywhere else perceptible—are lost. This has been caused by some pressure on the nose. Had the pressure been exerted on the nose of the dead face the bones of the nasal organ would have resisted the pressure, and no such flatness would have resulted as appears in the Death Mask. From this wax face another mould was probably made, and in this the Death Mask was cast.

Now let us trace the course that the hairs adhering to the Death Mask would have to

take if this theory be correct. From the dead face they adhered to the wax "flying mould." In this was cast a wax face and they adhered to this, and from this cast another mould was made, either of wax or plaster, which retained the hairs. In this mould the Death Mask was finally cast, and these hairs appear in it. The hairs would easily pass from one to the other—from mould to mask, and *vice versa*—as no precautions were taken to prevent them from doing so.

The Death Mask is in a fair state of preservation. A small fragment has been broken off the lower right side of the nose. Some persons have thought that this was caused by a portion of the plaster having there adhered to the mould; but the shape of the damaged place is such as to lead to the conclusion that it was the result of a knock from the side. On the other side of the nose there are indications of the plaster having been touched with a knife. Lines have been cut in the moustache and chin-beard to represent the hairs. A portion of the left upper lip has been accidentally removed and a part of the eyelashes of the left eye have disappeared.

Over the right eyebrow there is an indentation or scar on the forehead of the Mask extending towards the right side. More will be said about this hereafter.

On the back edge of the Mask there has been placed the inscription:

† A^o D^m. 1616.



THE DEATH MASK.—FIG. 4.

It has evidently been made with a blunt stick when the plaster was soft, and has no appearance of having been cut afterwards. If the latter had been the case, the letters would have presented a sharper appearance than they do. The figures are similar to those

used at the date inscribed on it, and there is no reason to suppose that they were put there at a later date.

The same inscription is also to be seen on two other angles in the interior of the Mask. Here they have not been touched by persons handling the cast, and they are in a better state of preservation than those first referred to, which are more exposed.

The surface of the Mask represents the pores of the skin with the greatest accuracy, and the incised lines which appear in the moustache and chin beard are those which have been made by the person making the Mask. It is impossible to obtain a cast of each hair as in life, for the grease and plaster cause them to stick together, and it is usual to cut the lines in the cast to imitate the hair. This must not be supposed to detract from the evidence that it is a cast from a face, and it furnishes no argument in favor of the Mask being a mere work of art. Indeed the skin surface so perfectly exhibited in the Mask forbids any such idea.

Regarding the question whether the art of making masks was known as early as Shakespeare's time, it can safely be answered in the affirmative. As far back as the time of Pliny (A. D. 23) masks were made. In his *Historia Naturalis*, published about A. D. 77, he states that the first person who made a plaster mould of a human face, from which a cast was subsequently made, was Lysistratus of Sicyon (321 B. C.). It is true that Pliny does not state that the mould was taken from a dead face; but if they were able to take them from the living, it would be easier to make the impression from the dead.

The passage from Pliny's *Historia Naturalis*, Lib. XXXV, 44, is as follows:

"Hominis autem imaginem gypso e facie ipsa primus omnium expressit, ceraque in eam formam gypsi infusa emendare instituit Lysistratus Sicyonius, frater Lysippi, de quo diximus. Hic et similitudinem reddere instituit: ante eum quam pulcherrimas facere studebant. Idem et de signis effigiem exprimere invenit. Crevitque res in tantum, ut nulla signa, statuæve, sine argilla fierent. Quo apparet, antiquiorem hanc fuisse scientiam, quam fundendi aeris."

A mask of Martin Luther is in existence. He died at Eisleben in 1546. Another one of Tasso, who died in 1595, is also extant.

It has been suggested that many of the figures in the old monuments in existence in England have probably been modelled from casts made from moulds taken from the faces of those that they represent, and the placid expression of their faces would seem to sup-

port this theory. If this be so there must have been men in England who understood how to make a mould from a dead face. Wax was, also, sometimes used, and casts of the faces of celebrated persons were frequently colored and used on lay figures. These were dressed in the garments worn by the deceased in life, and doubtless many who saw them lying in state believed them to be the corpses themselves. In the Chapel of St. Erasmus, Westminster Abbey, in an old closet, many of these lay figures may still be seen. In an account of the Abbey, published in 1754, it is stated that "these effigies resembled the deceased as nearly as possible, and were wont to be exposed at the funerals of our princes, and other great personages in open chariots, with their proper ensigns of royalty or honor appended." The same account states that the effigy of King Edward VI was originally clothed in crimson velvet robes, but time had made these resemble leather; but that those of Queen Elizabeth and King James I were stripped of everything of value. The effigies of King William, Queen Mary, and Queen Anne are handsomely dressed in lace and velvet. Here, also, was Nelson's figure, and Cromwell was here.

The mould from which Cromwell's face was cast was afterwards found.

The above instances fully establish the frequency of making masks of the dead. It now remains to inquire if the mask said to be that of Shakespeare really is his. In the first place, the theory relied on to account for the possession of a mask of Shakespeare by Count and Canon von Kesselstadt is utterly without facts to sustain it.

A mould is thought to have been taken from Shakespeare's face after death for the purpose of making the Stratford bust, and it was supposed to have been afterwards sent to London to Gerard Johnson or to his son, one of whom was the sculptor of the bust. A cast from this mould having been made, one of the ancestors of Count Francis von Kesselstadt is there supposed to have seen it, and, after it had served its purpose, purchased it from the sculptor. It then remained in his family, and finally descended to Count Francis von Kesselstadt. This is, of course, pure theory without anything to sustain it. None of the Kesselstadt family are known to have gone to England, though they might have done so without any record of their journey having been preserved. Then, again, how is the picture of the man on his death-bed to be accounted for? Some people have supposed that the date on it, 1637, refers to the time when it was copied from the cast, but I do not think the picture represents the same per-

son as the Mask, and am in favor of agreeing with those who regard it as a portrait of Ben Jonson. It is said to strongly resemble the portrait of the latter at Dulwich College. 1637 is the year Ben Jonson died, and it probably represents him lying in state. If the ancestor of Count von Kesselstadt obtained a cast of Shakespeare's face while in England, he might also have purchased this portrait of Ben Jonson. It is true that Professor Müller states that it had the inscription under it that, according to tradition, it was Shakespeare, but might not this inscription have been under the Mask when they both hung in the same collection, and Professor Müller have confounded the two?

Such is the history of the Death Mask, and that most careful and learned writer, Dr. C. M. Ingleby, in his chapter on "The Portraiture of Shakespeare," published in Part I of his *Shakespeare: The Man and the Book*, 4to, London: 1877, p. 84, says of it: "I must candidly say I am not able to spot a single suspicious fact in the brief history of this most curious relic."

Professor Owen, of the British Museum, stated that if the fact that the Mask originally came from England could be satisfactorily established, there was hardly any price that the Museum would have hesitated to pay for it. It is said that ten thousand pounds was the sum Becker asked for it.

Regarding the indentation over the right eyebrow, which has been referred to above, Professor John S. Hart, who saw the Mask in Darmstadt, wrote that it was "merely a flake of the plaster fallen or rubbed off." William Page subsequently went to Darmstadt specially to examine the Death Mask. He says, concerning this indentation (*A Study of Shakespeare's Portraits*, 48mo, London: 1876, p. 59): "From the photographs, I knew there must be some indentation and a loss of the texture of the skin in this discolored place, which, for some reason, had received the colored wash thus unequally. My first attempt to take an impression of this spot, together with a part of the forehead, failed, having tried it in soft modelling wax, which adhered somewhat and was distorted and lost in removing; but the *depression* in the spot was well shown in the *relief* of the wax at that point. My next attempt was in white, harder wax, with gauze intervening. This mould, though less delicate in parts, was very successful, and gave me a good cast in plaster; where the *indentation* is plainly visible, it may, perhaps, have been looked on as a defect, and has certainly been partially filled up. In the plain white of plaster the depression is still to be seen,

though in the discolored spot over the brow I could not at first detect it."

Mr. Page also made twenty-six measures from the Death Mask, which he afterwards compared with the Stratford bust. On page 48 of the above-quoted book he says: "Of these twenty-six measures, at least ten or twelve fit exactly corresponding points in the Stratford bust, which any one may verify if he will take the trouble to interpret the diagram here annexed and reduce all the measurements to solid geometry. Few persons need be told that this planet never did, at any one moment, contain two adult heads, whose faces agreed in any dozen like measures, and the law of probabilities makes it remote when such an epoch will arrive. To a working artist's mind, the agreement of these measures is either a miracle, or demonstration that they are from the same face.

"And, still further, the failure or misfit of the other more than dozen measures is confined to those parts of the face where there is acknowledged error on the part of the sculptor of the Stratford bust. In the language of science, 'measures are the inflexible judges placed above all opinions supported only by imperfect observations.'

"It is, indeed, singular that such an agreement in measure with the Stratford bust should not have been noted or published by the distinguished scholars and scientists in whose care the Mask was during its sojourn in England; but so far as I know, it has not hitherto been done."

Friswell (*Life Portraits of William Shakespeare*, 4to, London: 1864, p. 17) thus compares the Death Mask and the Stratford bust: "The Mask has a short upper lip, the bust a very long one; but this discrepancy is accounted for on the supposition that the sculptor had an accident with the nose. The nostrils are drawn up, almost painfully; the same is visible in the bust. There are several other points of resemblance, but these are very minute.

"On the other hand, the cast differs very widely from the bust *said* to have been cut from it. The nose is utterly unlike; in the cast it is a fine, thin, aquiline nose, and, as there can be no doubt that the cast is from a dead face, one feels irresistibly the force of Mrs. Quickly's *simile* in the much-contested quotation, as altered by Mr. Collier's 'old corrector';

"His nose was as sharp as a pen on a table of green freze."

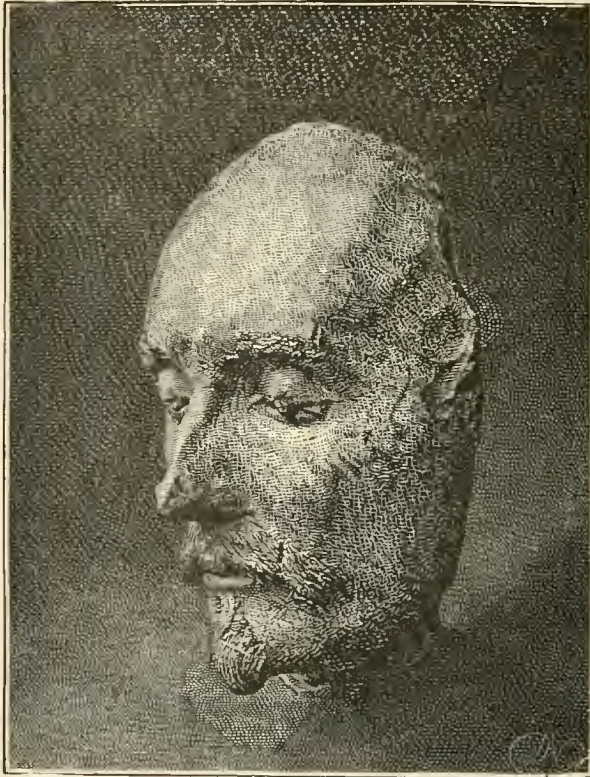
"The face is a sharp oval, that of the bust is a blunt one; the chin is narrow and pointed, that of the bust rounded or rather square,

and full of force; the cheeks are thin and drawn in, those of the bust full, fat, and almost coarse. Exception has also been taken to the age of the person expressed in this cast, some asserting that it is too young in look for the years of our poet at his death. But here we are in favor of the cast. Some time after death the skin seems to relax, the wrinkles to fill out, and the expression of care becomes one of quietude and peace. There are, moreover, plenty of indications of 'crow's feet' and wrinkles at the corners of the eyes; and the face, while it wants utterly the jovial look of the bust, is certainly one of

we may cite the cast from the features of Napoleon the Great preserved in the Invalides. Looking at it, with its drawn face and sharpened nose, one would rather think it a mask of the fine, thin features of Voltaire, than of the round and massive head of the conqueror Napoleon I."

Some years ago W. J. Thoms suggested that the Death Mask might be that of Cervantes, the author of *Don Quixote*, who died in Madrid in 1616. He further added that the features of the Mask resembled the pictures of Cervantes more than Shakespeare.

The portraits of Cervantes which are extant



THE DEATH MASK. PHOTOGRAPHED BY WM. PAGE.

a person who might have suffered, thought, and felt. * * * * *

"Lastly, it may be noted in regard to the Mask of the face in the custody of Professor Owen, that the extreme thinness of the nose and of the cheeks does not so much militate against its genuineness as one would suppose. The features alter extremely after death with most persons; and although Shakespeare is said to have died after a very short illness, he may have lost much flesh. The 'tombe maker,' wishing to exhibit him *ad vivum*, would alter this. As a parallel instance of extreme difference between life and death,

are all founded on a description of his appearance given by the author of *Don Quixote* himself. He describes himself as having a long face, chestnut-brown hair, silver-gray beard, which was originally of a golden color; a smooth, open brow, a clear eye with animated expression, a well-formed, aquiline nose, very small mouth, defective teeth, a dark complexion, and medium height.

From this description artists have constructed portraits of Cervantes, but no picture or engraving of him has any other authority for its foundation.

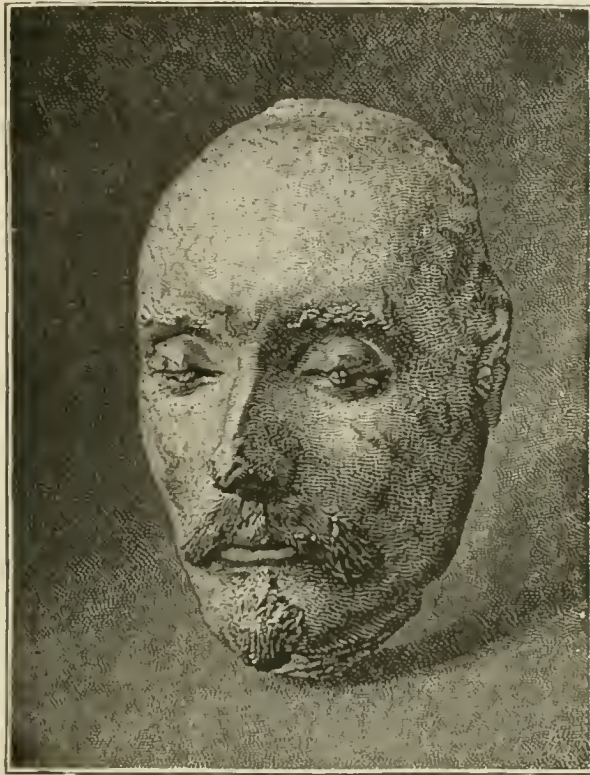
Cervantes died in the greatest poverty and

his burial was of the plainest description. No ceremony of any kind is known to have been observed. No tombstone was erected over his grave. In view of such facts as these, is it at all probable that any one should have conceived the idea of making a mask from his face?

Another fact in relation to this matter remains to be stated. Cervantes was born in 1547 and did not die until 1616. He was therefore sixty-eight years old at the time of his death. The latter was caused by dropsy. Now the Death Mask resembles the face of a man of fifty-two, which was Shakespeare's

he decided to make a colossal mask in plaster. This he did, and in another one of similar size he restored the small portions missing in the original Death Mask. In August, 1874, he went to Darmstadt especially to see the Mask. Dr. Becker gave him the fullest facilities for examining it, and permitted him to take photographs of it, to make accurate measurements with calipers, and to make impressions from portions of it. On his return to New York he made a life-sized bust in plaster, from which a bronze casting was finally made.

This bust is very handsome, and is a faith-



THE DEATH MASK. PHOTOGRAPHED BY WM. PAGE.

age, much more nearly than sixty-eight, and no one for an instant will think that it has any resemblance to the face of one who died of dropsy—where the features are much swollen.

Mr. Page always had the greatest faith in the Death Mask. He desired to paint a portrait of Shakespeare, and decided to adopt the Mask as the basis of his work, using also the Stratford bust, the Droeshout engraving, and the Chandos portrait. He first obtained thirteen photographs representing the Mask from different points of view. From these he made two clay masks of life size, but finally

ful rendering of the Mask. It is of the head and shoulders only. Looking at it from the front, one sees how strong the likeness is to the Stratford bust. The opening of the eyes by Mr. Page, and giving the face an air of life, instead of the painfully sad expression shown in the Death Mask, of course has much to do with this; but let any unprejudiced and competent critic place this bust alongside of a gray cast of the Stratford bust and he will be struck with the resemblance between them. The chief points of difference are the short nose of the Stratford bust as compared with the longer one of Page's bust, and the more

receding forehead of the latter in opposition to the prominent one of the Stratford bust.

A beautiful crayon drawing of Page's bust, representing the full-face view, was made, I believe, by the artist himself, and the few photographs of this which were taken are treasured by their fortunate possessors.

Numerous photographs of this bust have also been taken by Sarony, some of which do not do it justice.

Mr. Page also painted a three-quarter length portrait from the Death Mask, which has met with some unfavorable criticism, and which is certainly not as fine as his bust. The poet is represented as having risen from a chair, and is standing by a table, on which he rests his left hand. In his right hand he holds a book, which he has been reading, but has looked down as if in thought. This shows the eyelids drooping, and gives the face a somewhat sleepy expression. A large photograph from this picture, by W. Kurtz,

was published in 1875 by Louis Menger, New York.

J. Niessen drew a crayon portrait of the Death Mask, bringing it to life as Page did, but unlike the latter he confined himself to the Mask alone. Niessen's drawing exhibits a three-quarter face, and has a very animated expression. Its chief fault is in the too great prominence of the chin. Several excellent photographs of it have been published, and some of the larger ones are strikingly handsome. They were published by Stroefer & Kirchner, New York.

Of the Death Mask itself numerous photographs have been taken, representing it in many positions. The best are those taken by Page, two of which, carefully engraved on wood, are given herewith. The four smaller wood engravings are from photographs which were published in *Über Künstler und Kunstwerke*, 8vo, Berlin: 1867, accompanying an article on the Death Mask by Hermann Grimm.

J. Parker Norris

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